

New York State  
Department of Health

# Public Health Corps Summit



**Building Resilience in Public Health: Reimagining, Reinventing, and Rebuilding**  
**November 15-16, 2022**

## Using Systems and Strategic Thinking to Tackle Health Inequities

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define systems thinking and commercial determinants of health and explain their relevance to public health practice
- Explain the limits of a "business-as-usual" approach to public health in the face of national health crises
- Identify specific steps they can take as public health researchers, practitioners, and/or advocates to contribute more effectively to reducing health inequities in New York and the nation
- Describe the benefits of an intergenerational dialogue among public health practitioners to identify success and limitations of previous, current and future initiatives to improve public health and reduce health inequities



Using Systems and Strategic Thinking to Tackle  
Health Inequities:  
Towards a Public Health Practice for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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November 15, 2022

CUNY School of Public Health

# If you only have two minutes to listen....

## Three Premises

New York, the nation, and the planet face unprecedented health challenges.

Public health business-as-usual is not working.

We need to do something different if we want to survive and thrive.



## Five Strategies

1. Take the systems view, not the siloed view.

2. Think long term, not tomorrow's election or budget cycle.

3. Embrace conflict and debate (with civility).

4. Strengthen democracy.

5. Make public health an incubator of solidarity, collective well-being, and equity

## One Commitment

Another world is possible.



# Premise 1: New York, the nation, and the planet face unprecedented health challenges

## Public health crises of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

COVID-19 pandemic

Climate disasters

Rising burden of non-communicable diseases

Occupational illnesses and injuries from precarious work

Mental health conditions including depression and anxiety

Environmental exposures to air and water pollution

Injuries and deaths from firearms



# The Growing Role of Market Forces a Key Determinant of Health.

## What is different now?

### 21<sup>st</sup> century trends

- Corporate managed globalization
- Financialization of world economy
- Deregulation and privatization
- Business control of science and technology
- Promotion of ideology of individualism

#### Structural Influences

Stratification systems(e.g., racism)  
Global and national governance structures  
Laws  
Norms and values

#### Business Practices

- Lobbying
- Campaign contributions
- Marketing
- Product design
- Investment/disinvestment
- Sponsored research
- Public/private partnerships

#### Desired Outcomes

- Higher profits
- More market share
- Lower wages
- More favorable public opinion
- Stronger protection of intellectual property
- Lower taxes
- Less regulation
- Less competition

# What are commercial determinants of health?

- “Factors that influence health which stem from the profit motive”

West R et al. Addiction. 2013.

- “Social, political and economic structures, norms, rules, and practices by which business activities designed to generate profits and increase market share influence patterns of health, disease, injury, disability and death within and across populations.”

Freudenberg N, Lee K, et al. American Journal of Public Health. 2021;111(12):2202-11.



## Premise 2: Public health business-as-usual is not working

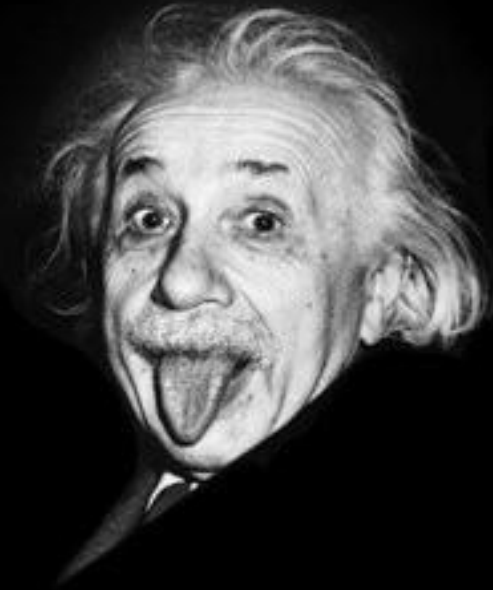
- Public health professionals still run mostly siloed programs.
- Most of the vast spending on health is primarily for clinical services, not prevention.
- New insights from social determinants of health scholarship mostly not incorporated into practice.
- Private commercial interests still have dominant voice in shaping health and lifestyle choices.
- Many elected officials show more deference to wealthy campaign contributors than to the public good.



Premise 3 We need to do something different if we want to survive and thrive

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results"

*Albert Einstein*



# Strategy 1: Take the systems view, not the siloed view

Systems thinking --a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems.

Strategic thinking -- careful and deliberate anticipation of threats and vulnerabilities to guard against and opportunities to pursue.

# Goal: to improve diets of children in New York

## Systems Approach

1. What roles do the food system, school system, social benefits policy, and agricultural system play in shaping dietary choices of children?
2. How do choices vary by income, race/ethnicity, gender and type of community?
3. What are main obstacles to improving children's diets?
4. Who are all the constituencies who support healthier diets for children?
5. Who would oppose the policies most likely to make a difference?

## Siloed Approach

1. How can we best educate children to make healthier food choices?
2. What roles can schools play in improving nutritional knowledge?
3. How can we educate parents to purchase healthier foods?
4. How can we persuade school cooks to prepare healthier food?
5. How can we best evaluate increases in children's nutritional knowledge?



# Some Policy Recommendations to Improve Diets for Children

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1. More stringent rules for restricting false and misleading advertising and health claims
2. State Attorneys General file lawsuits against false, deceptive, and misleading food advertising
3. Ban “junk food” advertising online and on television before 9 p.m.
4. Allow only advertisements for healthy products on public property.
5. Strengthen FDA labeling rules to make food labels a more useful tool.
6. Set stronger standards for formulation and marketing of toddler milks.
7. Mobilize child and health professional organizations to advocate for restrictions on predatory marketing to parents and children.
8. Enforce and further expand the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule to limit digital and social media marketing to young children.
9. Expand the use of antitrust rules to reduce monopoly concentration in the food industry.
10. Impose taxes on unhealthy products and dedicate revenues to promoting child health and development.
11. Adopt retail policies that encourage promotion of healthy products and restrict marketing and availability of unhealthy ones.
12. Eliminate federal corporate tax deduction for the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverage

# Strategy 2. Think long term, not tomorrow's election or budget cycle

## Yesterday's Impossible Dreams

Ending legal racial segregation  
Eliminating smallpox  
Getting the United States out of Vietnam  
Legalizing marriage and status of LGBTQI people  
Making environmental protection a priority  
Reversing mass incarceration

## Tomorrow's Impossible Dreams?

Public safety approaches untainted by racism  
Health care for all in New York and the nation  
Right to healthy food and affordable safe housing recognized by New York and US constitution  
Consensus that fair taxation is part of a decent society  
In a decent society, no company looks to profit by selling sickening products to children or other vulnerable populations

**What else?**

# Strategy 3: Embrace conflict and debate (with civility)



Public health advances from conflicts between those who benefit from unfair uses of power and wealth and those who are harmed.

Assuming we can *always* find common ground with powerful actors adds to their ability to shape agendas.

Use evidence and organizing to re-frame areas of conflict.

# Strategy 4: Strengthen democracy

**Democracy is a foundation for healthy societies. In democracies:**

- People have a right to participate in the decisions that shape their lives and health.
- Information people need to make wise decisions is freely available.
- Governments are expected to ensure that all people have rights to health.
- Leaders who fail to deliver on promises can be held accountable.

**Healthy societies benefit from democracy and democracies ensure rights to health.**

1. What roles can public health professionals play in strengthening democracies?
2. How will the public health enterprise benefit from stronger democracy?
3. How can we forge alliances between public health advocates and democracy advocates ?

# Strategy 5. Make public health an incubator of solidarity, collective well-being, and equity



**How can the public health community create new spaces in which to forge public solidarity , collective well-being, and equity?**



# Commitment: Another world is possible



**What can I say to you today and tomorrow to convince you another world is really possible?**

**What can you say to your peers, work colleagues, patients, families and communities that will make them believe another world is possible?**

# For more information

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Freudenberg N. *Lethal but Legal Corporations, Consumption and Protecting Public Health*, Oxford, 2015.

**On commercial determinants of health:** Freudenberg N, Lee K, Buse K, et al. Defining priorities for action and research on the commercial determinants of health: a conceptual review. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2021 ;111(12):2202-11.

**On systems thinking and public health:** Carey G, Malbon E, Carey N, et al. Systems science and systems thinking for public health: a systematic review of the field. *BMJ open*. 2015 ;5(12):e009002.